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METALANGUAGE IN EMILY DICKINSON'S POEMS

POR

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Para meu amor Christian, que sempre esteve por perto trazendo alto astral.

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ABSTRACT

Language is a theme which has always puzzled scholars and poets due to its complexity and its implications in human relationshiops. The belief on the effective communication of the words, though, is not unanimous. Especially when areas of knowledge other than the humanities start to retreat from the realm of verbal communication and create their own code, language loses its aura and power of conveyer of truth. This dissertation is an attempt to analyse some of Emily Dickinson's poems on language and its impact on human lives. In these poems, the poet highlights the paradox power/inefficiency of the words, as well as the significance of silence confronted with the void of language.

In the introductory chapter, I present my reading on some criticism of Dickinson's poetry. Much of this criticism oriented my analysis of the poems contributing largely to my understanding of them. In the next chapter, I discuss some theoretical texts on language by Saussure. Wittgenstein and George Steiner. The analysis of the poems itself is in the third chapter, which is followed by the conclusion of the dissertation as a whole. In general, I tried to read her poems closely, keeping track of her paradoxical views on language, as something that "fails, but entertains..."

RESUMO

Devido a sua complexidade e às suas tremendas implicações nas relações humanas, a linguagem sempre apresentou-se como um tema bastante intrigante para os poéticos e teóricos. Não há unanimidade, porém, quanto à sua eficiência na comunicação. Isso faz-se notar de forma particularmente clara quando as chamadas ciências exatas abandonam a comunicação verbal e saem em busca de um código próprio. A linguagem perde, então, o seu status do veículo da verdade. Esta dissertação é uma tentativa de análise de alguns poemas de Emily Dickinson sobre a linguagem e sua importância na vida humana. Nestes poemas, a poeta joga com o paradoxo forçca/ineficiência das palavras, bem como a significação do silêncio comparado com o vazio presente na linguagem.

No capítulo introdutório, eu apresento alguns críticos da poesia de Emily Dickinson. Grande parte desta crítica contribui muito para a análise e a compreensão dos poemas. No próximo capítulo, eu faço uma breve leitura de alguns textos teóricos de Saussure, Wittgenstein e George Steiner sobre a linguagem. O terceiro capítulo contém a análise dos poemas, o que é seguido pela conclusão da dissertação como um todo. De modo geral, eu tento ler os poemas detalhadamente, trilhando as idéias paradóxicas de Dickinson sobre a linguagem, como algo ineficiente, mas necessário.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Emily Dickinson published scarcely during her lifetime.[1] Charles Anderson once said that she wrote "cut off from communion with any but posterity."[2] As a matter of fact she even tried to keep some contact with the literary world through Thomas Higginson, and they wrote one another for some time. She ended up sending him some of her poems, but the reception is well known. For Higginson, who may certainly stand for the readers at that time, her style needed "corrections." Though the originality and newness of her poetry; caught him on the spot, he did not see her work as poetry; he rather described it as "beautiful thoughts and words," and tried to steer her towards a more conventional poetry.[3] Perhaps frustrated with this first contact, she never tried to make her poetry public again. After her

death in 1886, her sister found her manuscripts in one of her drawers, and family and friends published some selected poems.[4] Her early editors even tried to "make the meter scan and the lines rhyme."[5]

It was only in 1955 that Thomas H. Johnson published her complete poems and letters. Johnson's work is extremely important not only because of the completeness of his publications, but also due to his careful editing, which included a list of manuscript variants, previous publication data, and emendations of earlier editors.[6]

As soon as Dickinson's poetry was revealed, the originality and strangeness of her style were immediately noticed. According to Charles Anderson, "she used words as if she were the first to do so, with a joy and an awe largely lost to English poetry since the Renaissance."[7] She chose the hymn meter as a pattern, which had not been done by any other writer previously. Also, she used assonance, consonance, identical and suspended rhymes, that had not been explored in orthodox English before, as the main pattern of rhyming.[8] For David Porter, Dickinson's newness lay in the fact hat she was not concerned with the "revelation of a large and familiar truth but with the release of a small disconcerting mystery rediscovered."[9] In fact, her poetry has the fragmentary characteristic which would be later explored by the modernists. And she is even cited as a forerunner of

modern poetry for using devices such as etymology, which sends the readers back to root meanings.[10] Finally, some of her ideas on the nature of the poet, his tasks and power, are "animated by a strength of feeling and manner of articulation without precedent in our literature."[11]

According to James Woodress, criticism of Dickinson's work can be divided into the period before and the period after the publication of Johnson's variorum editions. Before the publication of Johnson's work, some important articles were published on Emily Dickinson's poetry, such as those by Conrad Aiken and Allen Tate, but there was also much speculation on the poet's life, which did little for the comprehension of the amplitude of her work. After Johnson's editions, however, Dickinson's work could be largely reviewed, and comprehensive studies on her poetry came about.[12]

Within this large scope of criticism on Dickinson's work, we have many choices on articles and books by outstanding critics. Some of them can be considered quite important in that they helped establish Dickinson's reputation. The aforementioned Conrad Aiken and Allen Tate are some of these examples. In their articles, equally named after "Emily Dickinson," they work with puritanism, religion and death in

her poetry, treating their themes by resorting to her biography frequently.

Ivor Winter is one of the early critics of Dickinson as well. In "Emily Dickinson and the Limits of Judgement," makes a negative criticism of her poems, arguing that she was praised for her worst mistakes and stating that her writing was "unpardonable" due to its obscurity. He analyses some poems and, finally, in spite of some restrictions, he recognizes that "The last night she lived" is great poetry.

Still within the category of important early critics, Donald E. Thackrey and Charles Anderson should be mentioned. Thackrey, in "The communication of the Words," works with Emily Dickinson's attitude towards language and words, and discusses her method of composition, as well as the power of the individual words in her poems. He analyses poems whose central theme is language and explores the paradox power/ inefficiency of language, and also her worshipful ideas towards silence. Anderson's book, Emily Dickinson's Poetry: Stairway of Surprise, was also quite important, as it was "the first comprehensive reading of all poems based on Johnson's text."[13] The critic is concerned only with poetry as Art and explores different themes on her poetry: "The paradise of Art," "The outer world," "The

inner world," and "The other paradise." Like Thackrey, Anderson deals with metalanguage and metapoetry, and lays emphasis on Dickinson's concern with expression.

After the establishment of Dickinson's work as part of the American culture and literature, a great number of academic criticism on her poetry and letters was published. We will deal here with some examples of this criticism on poetry only, and it is quite important to notice the variety of themes and approaches explored and viewed by the authors in general.

Roy Harvey Pearce, in The Continuity of American Poetry, examines the theme of "achievement of status through crucial experiences." For him, this achievement, or the attempt to achieve psychological status through experiences of love, marriage, death, faith, and poetic expression, pervades all the poet's works and is her central concern. Hyatt H. Waggoner, on the other hand, in American Poets: From the Puritans to the Present, works specifically with the theme of religion, considering Dickinson's view not only from a puritan perspective, but through a transcendental one, and states that the poet redefines faith in a more universal manner.

Touching the theme of death, we have Dolores D. Lucas's Emily Dickinson and Riddle. Death, according to the critic, is the

poet's major concern and presents an actual 'riddle' in her poetry. She analyses Dickinson's experiment of the riddle, trying to examine her idea of death, and, consequently, of life and truth.

More recently, feminist critics have also contributed to the criticism on Dickinson's work. Among many prominent authors, one relevant example is Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination. In this study, the critics place Emily Dickinson among a number of women writers from the nineteenth-century. Dealing with the theme of enclosure and escape in Dickinson's work, they explore "metaphors of physical discomfort manifested by frozen landscapes and fiery interiors."[14] Dickinson's work is said to follow the pattern of a female literary tradition, and she herself is seen to embody the character of the "madwoman" of many women writers's stories. Vivian Pollak, in "Thirst and Starvation in Emily Dickinson's Poetry," and Margaret Dickie, in "Dickinson's Discontinuous Lyric Self," present studies in which they bring about different themes: Pollak links thirst and starvation to renunciation: "lack of appetite" for human relationships. Food and drink imagery is also examined. Dickie illuminates the discontinuity of the "lyric-self" in contrast to the traditional male 'plot.'

In "The Maiden and the Muse: Dickinson's Tropes of Poetic Creation," Rita Di Giuseppe brings up the paradoxical theme of poet vs. poetry, considering Dickinson's struggle for creative autonomy and for avoiding the bias of being a woman writer. The creative power of the poet is compared to that of God.

Emily Dickinson's poetry is, then, a very rich universe to be explored. In this dissertation, however, I will be specifically concerned with some poems whose central theme is language and its implication. Surveying her poetry as a whole, I came across many poems about language and communication, as is the case of poem J. 1651:

A Word made Flesh is seldom
And tremblingly partook
Nor then perhaps reported
But have I not mistook
Each of us has tasted
With ecstasies of stealth
The very food debated
To our specific strength —

A Word that breathes distinctly
Has not the power to die
Cohesive as the Spirit
It may expire if He —
"Made Flesh and dwelt among us"
Could condescension be
Like this consent of Language
This loved Philology

Indeed, as Charles Anderson suggests, the poet is "concerned with expression from her earliest years."[15] And in many of her poems, like in the poem above, Dickinson sees the word as a powerful entity which has its own life and fulfills an emptiness in human life (This and other aspects in her poetry will be explored with more details in chapter III.)

Some critics have dealt directly with language as a theme in Dickinson's poetry. John Gross, for example, in "'Tell All the Truth But —," refers to Dickinson's 'noncommunication,' that is, the unwillingness to communicate. For him, the poet feared the "uncertainty of an understanding reason," which would prevent the reader from getting what she means. He compares Dickinson to several

other nineteenth-century artists who experienced the same fear for the 'communication of the word.' According to Gross, authors such as Emerson, Melville, Hawthorne, and Thoreau shared with Dickinson an 'obliquity' of method, which allowed them to 'tell the truth ' slantly, as if disguised by the fear of being attacked by an audience which was not contemporary enough to understand them. Even in her prose, Dickinson was indirect and, at times, she made no differentiation between prose and poetry.

In " Emily Dickinson, Emerson, and the Poet as Namer," John S. Mann compares Dickinson to Emerson in that both were concerned with the process of naming things. The poet as 'namer' is the one who sees and feels nature sensitively enough to create the names for its elements. For Mann, though, Dickinson's attitude differs from Emerson's, for she is conscious of the doubleness of things and of the loss and absence which exists is between a thing and its name. He highlights Dickinson's seduction for names, their power and implications. Naming for the poet presents something of an 'adamic' quality, in that it is a way of recreating what he sees, what he knows. In this sense, Dickinson's poet is the namer and the creator of the world, that is, the poet "possess[es] the world by naming it," what is evidenced in her poetry in the complex question of the

naming/possession dilemma. Its complexity ranges from the naming and defining of herself — her inner action and emotion — to the attempt to "define the indefinable," hence, the irony resulting from Dickinson's paradoxical poetry.

Many of Dickinson's poems on language are explicitly concerned with the inefficiency of language in communicating. In lines such as "If I could tell how glad I was / I should not be so glad," "I can't tell you - but you feel it —," "The definition of beauty is / That definition is none —," we can see the poet's attitude towards the communicability of language. But even showing the 'failure' of language in defining, telling things, Dickinson recognizes that language has much impact on human relationships, and the power and independence of words are made explicit by the poet in many poems, such as J.8:

There is a word
Which bears a sword
Can pierce an armed man —
It hurls its barbled syllables
And it is mute again —
But where it fell

The saved will tell
On patriotic day,
Some epauletted Brother
Gave his breath away.

Wherever runs the breatheless sun —
Wherever roams the day —
There is its noiseless onset —
There is its victory!
Behold the keenest marksman!
The most accomplished shot!
Time's sublimest target
Is a soul "forgot!"

Charles Anderson, in Emily Dickinson's Poetry: Stairway of Surprise, shows that Dickinson is "explicitly concerned with the power of language."[16] For him, the poet is conscious of the creative power of words, which is capable of "mov[ing] men's hearts." Poetry has its own life and the "living word has re-creative power."[17] By "living word", she means the word that is uttered and used, not the one that lies inert in a dictionary. The poet, then, believes in this higher power

of words and of eloquence itself, even while recognizing the ambiguity which can surround such a power. Because of this belief, her language itself is creative, and she can discover the "inner paradise of art by the language of surprise."[18] Anderson points out Dickinson's "oblique approach" as her manner of expressing, of telling the truth 'slant.' Within this obliquity, her consciousness of language inefficiency in dealing with emotions is apparent. She fears language's dangerous ambiguity, since, once created, words have their own life and may mean different things, with unexpected consequences.

Another aspect raised by the same critic is Dickinson's concern with craftsmanship and with the importance of the poet. The poet's craft is viewed as creation of beauty not in a heavenly mode, but in a theatrical one. Dickinson's poet is extremely human, private and devoid of divinity.

Also emphasizing Dickinson's belief in the power of words, David Porter's "The Poetics of Doubt" discusses the issue of the affective power of poetry in which "impact and innovation are concomitant."[19] For Dickinson, language caused a shock by the "surprise of discovery in the familiar issues,"[20] and the poet is the one who has "supreme obligations and power" to reveal language's

surprises. Language assumes a powerful role in the revelation of a "large and familiar truth."

Dickinson's attitude towards language seems to be, therefore, twofold. She sees in words an powerful and creative power; at the same time, she recognizes their inefficiency in communicating. In his article "Sign and Process: The Concept of Language in Emerson and Dickinson," Roland Hagenbüchle confronts these two aspects. Stating the differences between Dickinson's and Emerson's assumptions on the nature of language, he shows that, for Dickinson, words have some kind of destructiveness and their power is explosive; the "dangerous potential of language"[21] is explored by the poet through indirection, which becomes a strategy of "self-defence." Emerson's primacy is laid on 'the thing,' while Dickinson privileges 'the word.' Hagenbüchle builds up a differentiation between the transcendental sign and the symbol. The first presents a "subject-object relationship," while the second calls on the primacy of language, based on an "awareness of the irreducibly linguistic nature of all knowledge and, therefore, of all reality."[22] The sign still keeps the 'autonomy' of the object; the symbol ignores "extralinguistic reality." Dickinson's poetry brings out the symbol, and she is aware of the lack of convention existing between word and reality. Meanwhile, Dickinson is conscious of the

inadequacy of language. Perception of the thing, for the poet, is not exact; conversely, it involves loss, but even recognizing the limitations of language in communicating, she works with it in self-negation. Thus, Dickinson's poems "are often records of failure."[23]

Another critic who examines this double attitude of the poet before language is Murray Arndt in "Emily Dickinson and the Limits of Language," in which a positive and a negative attitude towards language are examined. While language has " resonances that range beyond the limits of logic,"[24] these same limits can confine language until it "no longer has the power to dominate [Dickinson's] vision."[25] Even recognizing the limits of words, she wants to break the limits of grammar "push[ing] her poems beyond logical limits of language."[26]

Faced, then, with this paradoxical view of language, its power and its inefficiency, I decided to explore one specific question concerning language in Emily Dickinson's poetry. If language is powerful, but useless in communicating, so why use language? What is the function of language in human relationships? Here we must examine some of the criticism related to the problem.

B. J. Rogers, in "The Truth Told Slant: Emily Dickinson's Poetic Mode," mentions the inability to grasp meaning, posing that "meaning does not lie in the world of external reality, and the senses

are not to be trusted entirely, although they are all that can be relied upon."[27] That is, although the perception through which we try to express things and feelings is inaccurate, and the way in which we express these same feelings and things is also inadequate, there is no other way to do it. Dickinson, in a sense, plays with language's ambiguity producing a circumferencial movement around a center which is omitted. Her poetry moves from the realm of 'knowable' things, to the attempt to utter the 'unknowable.' She is, though, quite conscious of the impossibility to present truth and reality straightforwardly; sometimes language is even unable to reflect truth.

In Lyric Time, Sharon Cameron states that language "mourns the space it must faithfully record"[28], and that Dickinson is conscious of this mourning that is language. The experiences which the speaker tries to convey are separated from the act of naming by the interpretation of that experience, which is not the event anymore, but the representation of it. But even if the speaker is conscious of this failure of language, the "necessity for names becomes apparent at those moments when they fail us."[29] Frequently, we do not have words for our mental images and, sometimes, "unable to say what we mean, we also fail to know it."[30] Dickinson, in Cameron's view, has a unique attitude in relation to the complex and dialectical relationship

between presence and representation. Dickinson tries to convey presence into language, which acts as a theatrical "source of hope." In other words, language would be the theater through which what is lost, the experience itself, would be recovered. Would that be the function of language? Would this function, of recovering the essence of experience, be important to human relationships?

Finally, Jerome Loving, in Emily Dickinson: The Poet on the Second Story, is concerned with the "illusions of language" which is our only protection in a wilderness of natural facts." He shows the relation language/life/lie in Dickinson's poetry. Language can turn life into lie and, consequently, distant from the "terrible harmony of nature." Would the function of language be, then, illusory? Would language be the illusory solution in a cruel natural world?

Having made these considerations, I want to reach a point in which I will report my questions to their very source : Emily Dickinson's poetry. In other words, my purpose in this dissertation will be to analyse some of Dickinson's poems which have language as their main theme, trying to come to some conclusion about the function of language for the poet. I will try to view several aspects in my analysis, namely the power/inefficiency of language, the importance of silence — given the noncommunicability of words and the task of the

poet as a namer. At the end of the analysis, I will try to answer the questions I asked before: Why use language? Is it important for our relationships?

Many of Dickinson's poems give a clue to the answer of these questions and my hypothesis is that, as a whole, they present language as a necessary hope for human life even though it works in self-negation.

In the chapter that follows, I will discuss some issues concerning language and human communication. In that chapter, I will discuss briefly some theoretical texts which may help illuminate my reading of Dickinson's poetry. Chapter 3 will contain the analysis of the poems themselves, and chapter 4 will present my conclusions in relation to the dissertation as a whole and to my hypothesis.

NOTES - CHAPTER I

1 - See Karen Dandurand, "Publication of Dickinson's Poems in Her Lifetime," Legacy (Spring 1984):7. According to the critic, Dickinson published 10 poems during her life.

2 - Charles Anderson, Emily Dickinson's Poetry: Stairway of Surprise (New York : Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960) 62.

3 - Mordecai Marcus , Emily Dickinson: Selected Poems - Notes (Lincoln: Cliff Notes, 1982) 10.

4 - James Woochess, "Emily Dickinson," Fifteen American Authors before 1900 - Bibliographical Essays on Research and Criticism, ed. Earl N. Harbert and Robert A. Rees (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1984) 189.

5 - Woodress 188.

6 - Woodress 190.

7 - Anderson 3.

8 - Anderson 11.

9 - David Porter, "Emily Dickinson: The Poetics of Doubt," Emerson Society Quarterly 77(1974): 89.

10 - Anderson 32.

11 - Porter 87.

12 - Woodress 197.

13 - Woodress 206.

14 - Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination (New Haven: Yale Up,1984) 590.

15 - Anderson 36.

16 - Anderson 30.

17 - Anderson 41.

18 - Anderson 46.

19 - Porter 89.

20 - Porter 89.

21 - Roland Hagenbüchle, "Sign and Process: The Concept of Language in Emerson and Dickinson," Emerson Society Quarterly 25(1979): 140.

22 - Hagenbüchle 143.

23 - Hagenbüchle 153.

24 - Murray Arndt, "Emily Dickinson and the Limits of Language," Dickinson Studies 57(1986):19.

25 - Arndt 21.

26 - Arndt 27.

27 - B. J. Rogers, "The Truth Told Slant: Emily Dickinson's Poetic Mode," Texas Studies in Literature and Language 14(1972): 336.

28 - Sharon Cameron, Lyric Time - Dickinson and the Limits of Genre (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1979) 137.

29 - Cameron 141.

30 - Cameron 145.

CHAPTER II

ON LANGUAGE

Language is our vehicle to talk of language itself. The definition may seem paradoxical at times, and this paradox has been a challenge for philosophers, psychologists, literary critics, linguists, and poets. Language is very complex, and it is through itself that we mention its complexity.

This preoccupation with language, with words, with the poet as the language-maker is a strong presence in Dickinson's poetry. And

this self-reflectivity of language we name metalanguage, that is, language about itself, words on words, as we see on poem J.1261 :

A word dropped careless on a page
May stimulate an eye
When folded in perpetual seam
The Wrinkled Maker lie

Infection in the sentence breeds
We may inhale Despair
At distances of Centuries
From the Malaria-

The poem above is not only about the word itself, but about the act of creation on which writing, language consists. (This poem will be discussed in more details on the following chapter.)

As pointed out in the former chapter, I here intend to analyse Emily Dickinson's poetry as language and metalanguage. Reading about language in Dickinson is reading a poet's viewpoint on language, on her own instrument of working. But this chapter does not aim to analyse her poems on language; its intent is to discuss other

considerations on the topic. In other words, I want to read other viewpoints on language, made by other people than the poet.

Language is a topic which has always puzzled scholars. Perhaps, Language's self-reflexivity came about when the very first 'speakers' started communicating through words. That means to say, language has always been complex and paradoxical for people, due to its unlimited realm of possibilities, and, sometimes, blankness.

In this chapter, I will briefly discuss texts by Saussure, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and George Steiner. I think it is a necessary step before I go on with the analysis of Dickinson's work, since it may be instrumental for the understanding of important aspects on language, though this theoretical background will not 'guide' my analysis later on, but help creating it. Also, I think it is important to have different views on the theme, so that we can occasionally compare them to Dickinson's own views and see how the poet's ideas on it can be different or similar to those of the scholars.

Before going to the texts themselves, I would like to raise an issue of relevance for the work as a whole. In the previous chapter, I mentioned the inefficiency of language in communicating, in expressing feelings and emotions. Shifting the focus now to the theoreticians, we can surely find the same concern with the 'sayable'

and the 'unsayable.' This is probably the track I will follow in the chapter, so that I can achieve a reasonable answer to my first questions; for those concerned with whether or not language communicates, language is sometimes a failure, sometimes successful, sometimes no better than silence.

The first important concept to be examined is Saussure's distinction between 'signifier' and 'signified.' For the linguist, the link between the name and the thing it refers to is not physical; it is arbitrary and mental. Instead of 'name' and 'thing,' Saussure uses the terms 'sound image' and 'concept.' These two elements are united in a psychological way, and one recalls the other. The sound image is the 'signifier,' which has a material quality, as opposed to the concept, which is the 'signified.' The two of them make up the sign. The sign has an arbitrary nature, for it results from an arbitrary association; that is, the signifier "actually has no natural connection with the signified."[1]

In Reading Saussure, R. Harris discusses Saussure's Cours de Linguistiqué, presenting the linguistic sign as being constituted by mental elements rather than by physical ones. The sign is the combination of signifier and signified, but it is ordinarily viewed as the sound image itself. According to Haris, then, Saussure's merits lie

in distinguishing between "The 'sound' of a word in the sense of its *image acoustiqué* and the 'sound' of the associated acoustic phenomena."[2]

Thus, the difference between the sound image and its associated acoustic phenomena relates to the linguistic sign being "construed simply as a mental combination of a certain sound pattern with a certain meaning."[3] Consequently the internal relationship between signifier and signified is arbitrary. This is an important principle of linguistics as elucidated by Saussure. Arbitrariness of language however, has nothing to do with individual choice, but with language being a social institution which goes beyond all others and has a unique character:

> ...*la langue,* claims Saussure, is arbitrary in a unique way. The absence both of external and internal constraints on the pairing ***signifiants*** with particular ***signifiés*** means that for any given language the choice of actual signs(e.g. *soeur*) from among the range of possible signs(*zoeur, soeuf, pataplu*...) is entirely unconstrained. This absolute freedom to vary 'arbitrarily' is the fundamental reason Saussure will adduce for the remarkable diversity of human languages and the no less remarkable susceptibility of languages to quite revolutionary structural changes. Other social institutions are not free to vary in this way because changes in their case (economic, legal, political, etc.) have immediate material consequences for the members of society. Thus although *la*

> *langue* is a social institution - and in certain aspects the very archetype of a social institution - its arbitrariness gives it a structural autonomy vis à vis society which would be unthinkable (and incomprehensible) in the case of any other established social institution.[4]

Saussure shows, therefore, that language is an arbitrary entity which exists "only through the associating of the signifier with the signified."[5] This process of association is how we 'name.' Naming is mental and arbitrary. Understanding is possible because there is a shared value which is attributed to a sign. But since language is an abstraction, the identity and the values of words can be confused. Identity can be viewed as the word itself, but the value of a word is not within the word itself. It has to do with what the word brings to mind, the realm of diversity that the word invokes through psychological flashes and associations.

In short, language is a complex system made up by the opposition of concrete unions. The signified and the signifier compose the sign. The sign, then, is the arbitrary name. Thus, language is an attempt towards representing the world, representing elements which lie outside the word. Saussure sees it as "the most complex and universal of all systems of expression."[6] And yet, this system of representation is arbitrary and pervaded by ambiguity.

We have briefly examined the way a linguist views language. In linguistics, language is the object of study, an articulated form of expressing messages. It is seen from a material perspective, taking into account its parts and characteristics. It is an 'object.' How would a philosopher view language? First of all, we must have in mind that philosophy studies reality as a whole, trying to apprehend the most of it in order to understand it better. Language is one part of reality, one of the most important, we must say, but it is not reality itself. Linguistics works with language through a metalinguistic discourse, whereas philosophy does it through a paralinguistic one. That is to say, Linguistics uses language to go after itself. It is language trying to see how itself represents the world. It is language as self-reflection. Philosophy uses language not to go after language itself, but to go beyond it and to apprehend the world, even though, as we will see next, language's representation of the world is limited.

Language is important to human life in that it directly affects human relationships, and it is definitely responsible for the moving of society. Ideologies, advertisements, disagreements, even wars are conveyed through language and, not rarely, because of it. Comprehending life, therefore, has to do with comprehending language, especially because it is through language that we try to

express what we see of the world. Consequently, what comes to mind is the question of representation. If language is our principal means to convey and represent reality, then our representation of it is not 'reliable.' Ludwig Wittgenstein, in his Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, states: "What finds its reflection in language, language can not represent ." [7] Language is viewed as a mirror, as an image of something else, and here we must recall Saussure's statement of the word being the sign for something which is elsewhere. The representation of this 'else' is distant from it. Reality is distant from the proposition of itself.

Wittgenstein discusses the difference between naming and describing. The latter is a possible operation; the same can not be said about the former. Describing implies taking into account 'how' something is; naming, 'what' it is. In describing, we must point out characteristics which are present in the thing described, that is, we are sending the meaning towards other words that, in turn, try to compose the significant whole. Naming is definitely more complex, since saying what something 'is' means giving it a name, that represents it. This name is the arbitrary sign stated by Saussure. As significant examples, some passages of the Tractatus are worth mentioning here:

> The sign through which we express the thought I call the propositional sign. And the proposition is the propositional sign in its projective relation to the world.[8]

Here the philosopher states the idea of language as representation. First, there is the thought, the mental concept, as put by Saussure, which is expressed by the sign. The sign, the "projective relation to the world," is the representation of the world. This is how we express our thoughts. Then, we have the acknowledgement of the limitations of such a representation:

> Objects I can only *name*. Signs represent them. I can only speak *of* them. I cannot *assert them*. A proposition can only say *how* a thing is, not *what* it is. [9]

The gap between reality and the representation of it becomes clearer, in that the assertion of it is impossible, given the fact that the 'What', the essence, can not be uttered. The 'what' lies outside language. We can 'name' things - that is the process explained by Saussure, the sign naming things through an arbitrary association of signified and signifier - but we can not 'assert' them .

A clearer statement of the gap representation/ reality can be found in the following passage by Wittgenstein:

> Propositions can represent the whole reality, but they cannot represent what they must have in common with reality ... That which mirrors itself in language, language cannot represent. That which expresses *itself* in language, we cannot express by language.[10]

The philosopher, thus, gradually moves from the perspective that language is the representation of the world, to the fact that there is an absolute gap between this representation and the world itself. Language is only a mirror for what it reflects. If we take this gap into account, the question about the existence of real communication arises. We must somewhat digress in order to make clear what is understood by communication.

Communication, in its primary sense, involves basically two or more elements and something to be said: receptor, sender, and message. A wish to understand and to be understood is also required, wherein comes the need of a shared knowledge; in other words, the two elements in the process must have a similar experience concerning what is being said. The problem lies in this similarity of experience.

How can we measure experience? If experience is something one acquires when one lives it, it is a private phenomenon. If each of us has her/his own experience, that is, if the outside world causes different impressions on each person, experience is unique. Perhaps it is about the uniqueness of private experience that Wittgenstein writes when he mentions the 'unsayable.' Mystic experience is private and can not be always uttered. On that, wrote Werner Leinfellner:

> It seems that Wittgenstein, under the influence Schopenhauer's role of contemplation in Art, follows here his early master : There are, according to him, things that can not be put into words. But they make themselves manifest. They are what is mystical.11

In saying that some things "can be said," it is understood that there are things that can be spoken of better than others. Wittgenstein gives relevance to metaphysics as being this aspect of living which is more difficult, sometimes impossible, to talk about. Metaphysics goes beyond physics, that is, beyond the elucidation of phenomena which can be seen or reasoned materialistically. It deals with the realm of thinking immateriality, thinking the being:

> The right method of philosophy would be this. To say nothing except what can be said, i.e. the propositions of natural science , i.e. something that has nothing to do with philosophy: and then always, when someone else wished to say something metaphysical, to demonstrate to him that he had given no meaning to certain signs in his propositions.[12]

Here, Wittgenstein enters the realm of the 'unsayable' and differentiates things that can be said from those that cannot. But what can be made out of what can not be said? Before going to the answer, I would like to focus attention on one more interesting proposition in the Tractatus. Having pointed out all the relativity of language and communication, all the possibilities, and, sometimes, the lack of possibilities raised by language, the author questions absolute truth itself:

> Whatever we see could be other than it is. Whatever we can describe at all could be other than it is.[13]

In this sense, language imposes severe limitations to reality, so diverse and personal that no description can ever be thought of as a mirror for it. In other words, language and reality, language and truth

impose limits on each other, since they are not compatible. Language has become the main vehicle for humanity's communication, for each one's reality; and yet, it cannot but distort reality.

Now we report back to the previous questions concerning what can be made out of what can not be said. According to Wittgenstein, silence is the answer: "What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence."[13] In order to avoid tautology and useless speech it is necessary to 'shut up.' Language goes only so far. Further is silence.

In closing this short discussion on Wittgenstein's propositions on language, it is worth quoting a significant passage of his work, in which he makes a comparison between language and dressing:

> So much so, that from the external form of the clothes one cannot infer the form of the thought they clothe, because the external form of the clothes is constructed with quite another object than to let the form of the body be recognized.[14]

After having examined some ideas on language by Saussure — language as representation of the world — and by Wittgenstein —

the gap between representation of the world(language) and the word itself —, we would like to discuss some ideas brought up by George Steiner in his book Language and Silence. Steiner also evokes the limitations of language and its failure to communicate, but presents the power of language and its importance to humanity as well. He discusses the role of language in modern society and its crisis, highlighting important historical aspects of language and literature, commenting on the relations between language and humanity.

The author presents language in the period of Christianity as being primordial, as a powerful instrument on which humans depended entirely:

> The primacy of the word, of that which can be spoken and communicated in discourse, was characteristic of the Greek and Judaic genius and carried over into Christianity. The classic and the Christian sense of the word strive to order reality within the governance of language. Literature, philosophy, theology, law, the arts of history, are endeavours to enclose within the bounds of rational discourse the sum of human experience, its recorded past, its present condition and future expectations.[15]

In the seventeenth-century, however, areas of knowledge other than the humanities, such as mathematics, start to "recede from the sphere of verbal statement."[16] That is to say, these areas begin to formulate their own systems of communication and verbal language is no longer their vehicle since the knowledge conveyed by them is not easily translated into language. The growing of autonomous and peculiar codes for natural sciences fostered the apparition of a long bridge between language and these new codes:

> Where biology turns towards chemistry, and biochemistry is at present the high ground it tends to relinquish the descriptive for the enumerative. It abandons the word for the figure.[17]

As a result, language loses its authority and its aura, and begins to be seen from a new perspective; confidence on it declines:

> This belief is no longer universal. Confidence in it declines after the age of Milton. The cause and history of that decline throw sharp light on the circumstances of modern literature and language.[18]

Language is no longer the conveyer of truth, but of itself only, wherein comes the division of experience and perception of reality into different realms, which are not equivalent.

> The actual facts of the case - the space continuum of relativity, the atomic structure of all matter, the wave-particle state of energy - are no longer accessible through the word. It is no paradox to assert that in cardinal respects reality now begins outside verbal language.[19]

Steiner poses the dichotomy words/feelings, stating that it is possible to put into words what one sees, but not what one feels. What is felt is anterior to or outside language. And this fact causes tremendous resonances on modern Art. As language is no longer at the center of life, reality has no equivalence with words anymore. Art may not be transposed into language, but into Art itself:

> Because the community of traditional values is splintered, because words themselves have been twisted and cheapened, because the classic forms of statement and metaphor are yielding to complex, transitional modes, the art of reading, of true literacy, must be reconstituted.[20]

Meanwhile, and paradoxically enough, Steiner stresses the essentially verbal character of western civilization. Western thought articulates itself verbally in many significant parts of our lives:

> We take this character for granted. It is the root and bark of our experience and we can not readily transpose our images outside it. We live inside the act of discourse.[21]

The power literature exerts over humanity is of boundless significance, as the reader's consciousness is occupied by great waves of impression coming from a great novel or poem. In this aspect, literature changes reality, 'literating' humans:

> A great poem, a classic novel, press in upon us; they assail and occupy the strong places of our consciousness. They exercise upon our imagination and desires, upon our ambitions and most covert dreams, a strange, bruising mastery.[22]

And what power does this literacy bring to humanity? What does it mean being able to speak or to write? Speech has taken us away from the natural world, from the company of the animals. In

being able to speak, we fictionalize our thoughts, our feelings, and we even come closer to divinity:

> Man's control of the word has also hammered at the door of gods. More than fire, whose power to illumine or to consume, to spread and to draw inward, it so strangely resembles, speech is the core of man's mutinous relations to the gods.[23]

Steiner illustrates this power of language with practical examples drawn out of modern history, and points out the destructive quality that language possesses if used for negative ends. The German language, for him, not only happened to be the language of nazism, but it also helped make the war and the holocaust:

> New linguists were at hand to make of the German language a political weapon more total and effective than any history had known, and to degrade the dignity of human speech to the level of baying wolves.[24]

Emily Dickinson, as we will see, is likewise aware of the power of language, of its use as a weapon. In poem J.8, for example, she calls attention to this aspect:

There is a word

Which bears a sword

Can pierce an armed man —

It hurls its barbed syllables

And is mute again —

But where it fell

The saved will tell

On patriotic day,

Some epauletted Brother

Gave his breath, away.

(...)

Here we see clearly that with her game of words — words/sword, armed/barbed — the poet presents language as a weapon which can "pierce an armed man." And, in fact, a weapon that can kill. The "epauletted Brother" who "gave his breath away" is not only the victim of a metal sword, but rather of the word as a sword, as a dangerous sword which can be used to kill and be 'mute' again. Here we have the danger of the words in use, of language being able to destroy and fall into silence, always ready to be spoken again.

And, then, we confront, once again, the power and void of language. The question which arises from Steiner's discussion is related to the attitude the writer takes before such an unsolved paradox. The title Language and Silence makes, then, sense, in the context of Dickinson's poetry: "Beyond the poems, almost stronger than them, is the fact of renunciation, the chosen silence."[25] Conscious of the immense void present in language, in spite of its power, the poet elects silence as an answer the limitations of language, not to say as a refuge for such. This 'retreat' from language is historically recent, given the change of values in relation to language.

The poet has become an ambiguous being who, concomitantly, plays the role of master of language, and escapes from it. As the one who creates words, who renews them, and keeps them alive, the poet can be compared to god. Recalling Dickinson's poem J.569, we have a hierarchy between poet, sun, summer, and heaven:

I reckon — when I count at all —
First — Poets — Then the Sun —
Then Summer — Then the Heaven of God —
And then — the List is done —

But, looking back — the First so seems

To Comprehend the Whole —

The Others look a needless Show —

So I write — Poets —All

(...)

The poet is the God of words. It is he who comprehends nature — sun, summer — and even the mystical — heaven. He is the first of the list, and the others are even 'needless' when compared to him. But, anyway, and probably because he knows the destructive power he has in hands, he seeks refuge in silence. As Steiner remarks,

> This revaluation of silence — in the epistemology of Wittgenstein, in the aesthetics of Weber and Cage, in the poetics of Beckett — is one of the most original, characteristic acts of the modern spirit. The conceit of the word unspoken, of the music unheard and therefore is in Keats, a local paradox, a neo-Platonic ornament. In much modern poetry silence represents the claims of the ideal...[26]

In the next chapter, we will see how Emily Dickinson writes about silence as one possible solution to the poet involved with language and its paradoxes.

NOTES - CHAPTER II

1- Ferdinand de Saussure, "Course in General Linguistics," Contemporary Literary Criticism, eds. Robert C. Davis and Ronald Schleifer (New York: Longman, 1989) 160.

2 - Roy Harris, Reading Saussure (London: Duckworth, 1987) 59.

3 - Harris 64.

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5 - Saussure 160.

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7 - Ludwig Wittgenstein, Tractatus Logico- Philosophicus (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1951) 189.

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12 - Wittgenstein 189.

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14 - Wittgenstein 63.

15 - George Steiner, Language and Silence (London: Penguin Books, 1969) 32.

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17 - Steiner 36.

18 - Steiner 33.

19 - Steiner 37.

20 - Steiner 30.

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24 - Steiner 140.

25 - Steiner 41.

26 - Steiner 70.

CHAPTER III

DICKINSON'S METALANGUAGE POEMS

Up to this point, we have seen how scholars view language and its paradoxes. We have briefly related their ideas to Dickinson's poetry. In this chapter, we will deal exclusively with her poems. In many of them, we see the conflict between elements of power and weakness in language, as in the following:

J.1261

A Word dropped careless on a Page
May stimulate an eye

When folded in perpetual seam

The Wrinkled Maker lie

Infection in the sentence breeds

We may inhale Despair

At distances of Centuries

From the Malaria —

There are several elements in the poem which imply power — "perpetual seam", "Infection", "distances of Centuries", "Malaria[2]. The words together make up a story of long lasting power and influence. The influence of the "wrinkld Maker" over the "eye". That is to say, the reader being influenced by the original author; the influence of artistic creation. The wordly effect, which is "folded in perpetual seam," stays in the 'seam' for centuries. The reader is even able to inhale the despair from 'malaria.' This is a poem about the power and independence of language, about the long distance in time and space transposed by the text.

Also, two important elements here are not in opposition but rather in complicity: the 'eye' and the 'wrinkled maker.' The word carelessly dropped by the 'Maker' — the poet — stimulates the 'eye' —

the reader. And there is the link between them — the infection. What would Malaria stand for? Would literature be like an infection 'locked' in books? If so, the simple reading of any poem would 'spread' it. The expression 'perpetual seam' is quite strong and suggests the independent life of the word. Here we recall another poem (J.12 12), whose theme is similar:

A word is dead
When it is said,
Some say.

I say it just
Begins to live
That day.

In this poem, Dickinson states her belief in the power of the single word is stated. Once a word is used, it "Begins to live." This is a very dickinsonian thought - viewing the word as a live and powerful entity. Some of her poems even look like lists of words, as if in an attempt to show the individual life and suggestive force of each of them.

J.1332

Pink — small — and punctual —

Aromatic — low —

Covert — in April —

Candid — in May —

Dear to the Moss —

Known to the Knoll —

Next to the Robin

In every human soul —

Bold little Beauty

Bedecked with thee

Nature forswears

Antiquity —

Each word here seems to assume a definite and separate role, a role that is stressed by punctuation. The subject of the poem — Nature — comes only at the end. Firstly we have all the words and expressions that 'qualify' it — each quality, each description with a freight of its own, as if in a game of words, describing a unique element with multiple characteristics, multiple words. And each of

these words seems to be lying alone on the page bringing forth its own life, as Roland Hagenbüchle remarks:

> Emily Dickinson, too, was concerned with the renewal of language, but for her the emphasis lay always on the word as such.(...)
> How important the single word is to her may be gathered from her strategy of foregrounding words through italics, capital letters, and the hyphen. [1]

John S. Mann also calls attention to this aspect in her poetry:

> Single words can 'glow' in her sensibility with a royal, a created life of their own, once they have been 'named' by the poet. Nothing seemed finally more important to her than this released power of the single word.[2]

In another poem, she recognizes the powerful impact of words on human life:

J.1409

Could mortal lip divine

The undeveloped Freight

Of a delivered syllable

'Twould crumble with the weight.

There are several suggestive figures in the poem, indicating the speaker's lack of consciousness of the power of language. The very first verse, "could mortal lip divine", takes for granted the human unconsciousness in relation to something. The next two lines present a playful opposition of the figures "undeveloped Freight/delivered syllable." The syllable, the word being delivered, necessarily leads to the development of the "Freight." What would Freight here mean? The value of the syllable? Or the meaning of it? In the last line, the words "crumble" and "weight" suggest the powerfulness of this "Freight." Speakers, therefore, are not conscious of the impact that the spoken word has on reality. In the words of Wittgenstein,

> Man possesses the Capacity of constructing languages, in which every sense can be expressed, without having an idea how and what means — just as one speaks without knowing how the single sounds are produced.[3]

Still concerned with the powerful aspect of language, Dickinson makes a meaningful comparison between a frigate and a book:

J.1263

There is no Frigate like a Book
To take us Lands away
Nor any Coursers like a Page
Of prancing Poetry —
This traverse may the poorest take
Without oppress of Toll —
How frugal is the Chariot
That bears the Human soul.

Book, page — language — have here the same characteristic movement of a frigate, of a courser. The word poetry even receives the adjective, prancing, which gives it movement, life. Literature has the power to take readers on a trip; nonetheless, we are tempted to say that the poet is writing about an interior trip, one that does not imply the "oppress

of Toll," and that "bears the Human Soul." But though interior, this trip is no less important, since it "take(s) us Lands away."

The same force through distance, through "Lands away" presented in the poem above is also shown in relation to time. We have already seen this aspect in the beginning of this chapter, when, in the poem J.1261, the poet mentions "distances of Centuries." In the following poem, Dickinson gives the word an idea of perpetual youth, professing her faith in the eternal eloquence of language:

J.1467

A little overflowing word
That any, hearing, had inferred
For Ardor or for Tears,
Though Generations pass away,
Traditions ripen and decay,
As eloquent appears —

In the initial verse, we have the opposing qualities little/overflowing of the word. The second adjective is quite suggestive in terms of omnipresence — perhaps not a physical

presence, but a temporal one. Also, the terms Ardor and Tears carry their share of importance in that they bring about opposing feelings of happiness and sadness which can be strongly recalled by words. In the verses "Though Generations pass away,/ Traditions ripen and decay," the poet establishes the value of the word as being above that of time and tradition. Although it is through words that humanity transmit its values, knowledge, usages, thoughts, and though these aspects change from generation to generation, the word itself does not change; it stays eloquent. Thoughts and ideas grow old; words remain impervious to time.

In considering the power of words, Dickinson is also concerned with the ones who work them. In some poems, she writes directly about poets and their craft, as in J.448:

> This was a Poet — It is that
> Distills amazing sense
> From ordinary Meanings —
> And Attar so immense
>
> From the familiar species
> That perished by the Door —

We wonder it was not Ourselves

Arrested it — before —

Of Pictures, the Discloser —

The Poet — it is He —

Entitles Us — by Contrast —

To ceaseless Poverty —

In the first stanza, the poet's craft is already defined, the distillation of "amazing sense/From ordinary Meanings" —that is, renewing language, if not creating it. The poet is the one who makes familiarity unfamiliar and, meanwhile, makes the reader also a part in the creative act — "We wonder it was not Ourselves/Arrested it — before —." Nevertheless, in the third stanza, the poet's superiority is evident when we — the readers — are entitled to "poverty." Certainly, his superiority is related to his power of creating and renewing words, of disclosing "Pictures —" and this image may well mean that the poet is able to disclose, to describe reality with more Art. The last verses restate the timeless Fortune which the poet possesses — the ability to deal with words.

Also, in poem J.569, Dickinson endows the poet with superior abilities, displaying him among several other elements:

I reckon — when I count at all —
First — Poets — Then the Sun —
Then Summer — Then the Heaven of God —
And then — the List is done —

But, looking back — the First so seems
To Comprehend the Whole —
The Others look a needless Show —
So I write — Poets — All —

Their Summer — lasts a Solid Year —
They can afford a Sun
The East — would deem extravagant —
And if the Further Heaven —

Be Beautiful as they prepare
For Those who worship Them —
It is too difficult a Grace —

To justify the Dream —

The poet comes before Sun, Summer and heaven. Why is he the first? The answer comes in the second stanza: the poet is able to "comprehend" the other elements. He is inside Nature, but, meanwhile, he possesses it, in that he can understand it. More than this, the Poet "afford[s]" nature, creating it with words. The "Heaven" they [the Poets] "prepare" — that is, the fictional heaven they create with words — Poetry — is a "Grace." The poet, in this poem, is compared to God. He is superior, he has worshipers, and he also prepares a heaven. In the last stanza, however, we have a hint ["It is too difficult a Grace —"] that his divinity is not easily understood, the "Dream" is not always justified. Is the "Dream" of language more difficult to be attained? Why is the Poet's craft "too difficult a Grace —/ To justify the Dream —"? These questions lead us to another aspect of Dickinson's considerations on language.

Up to this point we have seen how Dickinbson acknowledges the suggestive power language possesses. In most of the poems discussed, she declares language's surviving power through time and its strong impact on human relationships. We have also seen the importance of the poet as the one who deals with such an important

artifice. Although in these poems Dickinson shows how powerful language can be, in none of them she mentions real communication of feelings and ideas. Our next step will be the reading of some poems in which the poet shows her mistrust of language as a means of effective communication.

J.581

I found the words to every thought
I ever had — but One —
And that — defies me —
As a Hand did try to chalk the Sun

To Races — nurtured in the Dark —
How would your own — begin?
Can Blaze be shown in Cochineal —
Or Noon — in Mazarin?

The poem above is about the difficulty of putting thoughts into words. The image used, the "Hand [that tries] to chalk the Sun" implies huge difficulty, or rather, impossibility. The second stanza presents two very improbable ideas: Blaze — Cochineal / Noon —

Mazarin. There are, indeed, words for many thoughts, but this possibility goes only to one point. There is "One" which "defies" the poet. What kind of thought would that be? Here we must also recall poem J.1668:

> If I could tell how glad I was
> I should not be so glad —
> But when I cannot make the Force,
> Nor mould it into Word,
> I know it is a sign
> That new Dilemma be
> From mathematics further off
> Than from Eternity.

The first two lines of the poem already come up with the difficulty of communicating gladness. She names this difficulty after "Dilemma," which is more related to "Eternity" than to "mathematics." Here we have two key elements in opposition, which are essential for the reading of the poem. "Mathematics" would surely stand for precision, which is a quality we do not usually connect to feelings, such as gladness. Conversely, "Eternity" can bring to the reader's mind

a more generalized idea, absolutely unprecise. Since Dickinson cannot define "how glad" she feels, she does not go on trying to define, but works with oppositions which in a way gives us a vague idea of her feelings. Her gladness would be much more related to "Eternity" than precise.

Roland Hagenbüchle has accurately described Dickinson's strategy in producing definition:

> Knowledge for her cannot be fixed in terms of some definite truth. This would be an inadmissible act of hypostatization or reification, especially where religious concepts are concerned with their intimations of an objective supernatural world. Therefore, her definitions are dynamic and open-ended explorations rather than assertions. In contrast to the Bible's apodictic "Center," Dickinson's poetry — to use her own term — is a poetry of "Circumference" (L. 950); it pursues the movement of the spirit in the very process of knowing, a process which is inseparably bound up to the movement of language.[4]

As an example of Dickinson's "Circumference" in poetry, poem J.300 presents an attempt to define "morning:"

> "Morning" — means "Milking" — to the Farmer —
>
> Dawn — to the Teneriffe —

Dice — to the Maid —

Morning means just Risk — to the Lover —

Just revelation — to the Beloved —

Epicures — date a Breakfast — by it —

Brides — an Apocalypse —

Worlds — a Flood —

Faint-going Lives — Their Lapse from Sighing —

Faith — The Experiment of Our Lord —

Starting with the single word, the poet builds a whole universe of meanings, bringing to the poem relations between "Morning" and other words. Probably, she tries to show the nonrigidity of meaning that words have; rather, they have relative meanings according to relative situations. As Hagenbüchle points out, the poet works with "the movement of language,"[5] moving from point to point, from word to word, trying to 'overmean' the word "Morning." The very structure of the poem suggests the infinitude of meanings "Morning" can have. In the first verse, she presents the word to be defined. In each of the other verses, she presents one different meanings for one different

situation. The list could continue for much longer, given the infinite quality of metaphors. As Wittgenstein would put it,

> What the axiom of infinity is intended to say would express itself in language through the existence of infinitely many names with different meanings.[6]

Of course, these "infinitely many names" mentioned by the philosopher can be put in opposition through metaphors, so that the possibilities of meanings would be infinite. Preciseness in definition becomes a complex question, also mentioned by Dickinson:

J.988

The Definition of Beauty is
That Definition is none —
Of Heaven, easing Analysis,
Since Heaven and He are one.

The expressions "Definition of Beauty / Definition is none" oppose each other almost with mathematical precision. The word "none" reduces the two verses to almost nothing, and gives the poem an idea of uselessness. Yet the other two lines rescue the act of defining by

bringing to the scenery a metaphor — "Heaven and He," — That does not solve, but postpones the problem.

The impossibility of naming certain feelings is, thus, a great poetical concern for Dickinson:

J.1382

In many and reportless places
We feel the Joy —
Reportless, also, but sincere as Nature
Or Deity —

It comes, without a consternation —
Dissolves — the same —
But leaves a sumptuous Destitution —
Without a Name —

Profaned it by a search — we cannot
It has no home —
Nor we who having once inhaled it is —
Thereafter roam.

Here she tries to report the "reportless" — reportless places — reportless joy. And even comparing this feeling to Nature or God, she cannot name it. What would, then, "sumptuous Destitution" refer to? The emptiness caused by such a joy or the impossibility of naming it? John S. Mann, in "Emily Dickinson, Emerson, and the Poet as Namer," discusses this point:

> For Emily Dickinson found in naming an activity that could release the magical, Adamic power of language, allowing her to recreate her world, and somehow possess its disparate materials. Naming could help fulfill her passion to know.[7]

Indeed, in poem J.1452, Dickinson makes an interesting consideration about words and thoughts:

> Your thoughts don't have words every day
> They come a single time
> Like signal esoteric sips
> Of the communion Wine
> Which while you taste so native seems
> So easy to be
> You cannot comprehend its price

Nor its infrequency

The problematics of knowing/naming is clear. The first verse already states the separation between thoughts and words. What follows is an explanation of how difficult it is to comprehend, or even, apprehend thoughts or knowledge. The poet even mystifies the question by calling up a comparison with the "communion wine," which can taste so native, but which like thoughts themselves, is incomprehensible. The term 'words', as seen, is mentioned only once. What the rest of the poem is about is the complexity of understanding human thoughts. Would this distance between words and thoughts make the latter more incomprehensible? Would thoughts 'which have words' be easier to understand? Or would they rarely have words? What sort of thoughts can really be uttered? Two passages by Wittgenstein lead us in the way of an answer:

> The correct method in philosophy would really be the following: to say nothing except what can be said, i.e., propositions of natural science — i.e. something that has nothing to do with philosophy — and then, whenever someone else wanted to say something metaphysical, to demonstrate to him that he had failed to give a meaning to certain signs in his propositions.

> Whereof we cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.[8]

Silence, would, therefore, be an alternative for the unutterable thoughts. According to Wittgenstein, the only alternative. In many of Dickinson's poems, we can also see the apology of silence. The poet states that silence is a superior language, sometimes more powerful to communicate than language itself:

J.989

Gratitude - is not the mention
Of a Tenderness,
But its still appreciation
Out of a Plumb of Speech.

When the Sea return no Answer
By the Line and Lead
Proves it there's no Sea, or rather
A remoter bed?

The very first word of the poem — "Gratitude" — represents a feeling and it is soon dissociated from speaking — "is not the mention." The "still appreciation" would be a much more adequate

means to express gratitude than the "mention." In the second stanza, she mentions the sea playfully as an element of great power, but also 'answerless.' The lack of an answer does not render the sea weaker, but "remoter."

In the next poem, she also points out the superiority of silence, or even of other means of communication over language:

J.97

The rainbow never tells me
That gust and storm are by,
Yet is she more convincing
Than Philosophy.

(...)

In many other poems, the poet shows the importance of silence as well:

J.1004

There is no Silence in the Earth — so silent
As that endured

Which uttered, would discourage Nature
And haunt the World.

J.1251

Silence is all we dread.
There's Ransom in a Voice —
But Silence is Infinity.
Himself have not a face.

Dickinson's strong respect for silence parallels her mistrust of the power of communication presented by language. In the beginning of this chapter, we read some poems in which she praises the power of individual words. The contradiction shows itself when she declares her awareness in relation to things we can 'not' utter and her worship for silence. If, however, we take words and communication as two separate and definite things, the contradiction is made less strong. Dickinson never takes for granted that language could communicate feelings, abstractions. According to Sharon Cameron, the poet was conscious of the lack language represents.

> Outside of temporality, or outside of the realm in which time and space diverge from each other, consciousness is a noon

> so dazzling that its rays make of the mirror a mere glare. So language sings light's praises by asserting its own inadequacy. So the thing itself, without representation, negates the world of imperfection from which representation arises. So language mourns the space it must faithfully record.[9]

Aware of language's limitations, Dickinson acknowledged the importance of silence. But in order to express silence's importance, she, paradoxically enough, uses words. Why?

J.1681

Speech is one symptom of Affection
And Silence one —
The perfectest communication
Is heard of none —

Exists and its indorsement
Is had within —
Behold, said the Apostle,
Yet had not seen!

Naturally this is a poem about the superiority of silence as a form of communication. The real communication is somewhat interior — "heard of none/had within —." But the first line of the poem mentions "Affection." Although not being effective, language is, in a sense, important to humans affectively:

J.1700

To tell the Beauty would decrease
To state the Spell demean —
There is a syllable-less Sea
Of which it is the sign —
My will endeavors for its word
And fails, but entertains
A Rapture as of Legacies —
Of introspective Mines —

The lack of faith in language as a means of communicating is promptly stated. At once, the verbs 'tell' and 'state' are disqualified, or, at least — if this term here sounds too strong — not believed. Telling the Beauty decreases it. Aesthetics has much more to do with feeling, seeing, perceiving things. Would aesthetic appreciation have anything

to do with telling how beautiful one object is? And also, stating "demean(s)" the Spell; that is to say, utters what can only be felt. The word that attempts to utter reality is just a (weak) reflection of it. "There is a syllable — less Sea/Of which it is the sign —." The word Sea here implies the immensity and complexity of what is reflected in the "sign," in language, in the arbitrary code theorized by Saussure.

In another poem, Dickinson explores the problem of telling the truth:

J.1129

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant —
Success in Circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth's superb surprise

As Lightning to the Children eased
With explanation kind
The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind —

The poet states her fear in relation to 'telling the truth,' as it may not be directly told. Telling "slant" is her suggestion , since, otherwise, truth can 'blind'. Would her suggestion for indirectness have any connection with her fear of the void in communication in language? In other words, would truth be distorted by language's lack of preciseness and inefficiency?

At any account, referring back to poem J.1700, we perceive that Dickinson's unfaithfulness to 'telling' and 'stating' is clear. And she is even conscious of her failure: "My will endeavors for its word / And fails..." Hagenbüchle says that her poems are often records of failure and [that] she works in self-negation."[10] As a poet, she is aware that her 'will' fails. But the following words make the poem problematic: "And fails, but entertains." This verse could sound like: 'I know language is a failure, but I like to write, to speak, to hear the sound of words, to have the illusion of real communication. After all, is it not this feeling of communicating that keeps us together?' At this point, it might be interesting to recall the use of the term "affection" in poem J.1681. Would language not be one affectionate link between us?

Still focusing on this affectionate link, we return now to a poem we saw in the introductory chapter of this dissertation:

J.1651

A Word made Flesh is seldom
And tremblingly partook
Nor then perhaps reported
But have I not mistook
Each one of us has tasted
With ecstasies of stealth
The very food debated
To our specific strength —

A Word that breathes distinctly
Has not the power to die
Cohesive as the spirit
It may expire if He —
"Made Flesh and dwelt among us"
Could condescension be
Like this consent of Language
This loved Philology.

In the first stanza, there is the "Word" which is "made Flesh." Would that be the act of speaking? The word in its material realization when delivered through human's lips? But, if so, the act of speaking is unique and almost always solitary — "seldom / And tremblingly partook." Also, it is not "reported." Would that stand for the idea of the act of speaking being individual and impossible to explain, to report? That means to say that words are not able to report themselves, or to report how they happen to be. In the following verses of the stanza, however, we see the idea of words in use, helping humans to fulfill a need. Words become, then, "The very food debated" which satiates our "strength." And this is a fact that brings "ecstasies of stealth," that is, the act of speaking can fail in not being able to be "Partook" but fulfills a human need for strength, and, indeed, brings "ecstasies of stealth." And here again we have the idea of the act of speaking being individual and even secret, in the word 'stealth.' Speaking would bring, thus, some inner satisfaction. Its impact in the outer world can be false, but it fulfills inner needs.

In the next stanza, the immortality of the word is asserted and the word is even compared to Jesus. Philology is viewed rather in a religious sense, in which the word is the immortal god. Like a god,

the word is viewed as something cannot understand, but on which we have some faith.

Poem J.1587 also compares language and religion:

> He ate and drank the precious Words —
> His Spirit grew robust —
> He knew no more that he was poor,
> Nor that his Frame was Dust —
>
> He danced along the dingy Days
> And this Bequest of Wings
> Was but a Book — What Liberty
> A loosened spirit brings —

Words are viewed as food and drink — the bread and the wine that fed not only the body, but rather the spirit. As in the aforementioned poem (J.1651) words fulfill an inner hunger, and in the poem above, even more obviously, they make the spirit "robust." "He," be it Jesus or simply any character, is made strong through words, and in a way, is perpetuated through them. This we can infer from the image "frame was Dust-." After having drunk and eaten the words, "He" knows no

more that "his frame was Dust." The "frame," his image, will not vanish like "Dust" anymore, or at least, the words made him believe so. Words made him forget his poverty and mortality.

The second stanza brings, thus, the statement that his joy was caused by words. The "Book" is compared to a "Bequest of Wings" that loosens the spirit. The power of words, then, is like the power of God who also gave Jesus relief and freedom. The poem brings this power into a human level, though. Words are earthly. they are made up by humans and can affect humans by giving them freedom and hope.

I would like here to reread the poem with which we have started our discussion in this chapter:

J.1261

A Word dropped careless on a Page
May stimulate an eye
When folded in perpetual seam
The Wrinkled Maker lie

Infection in the sentence breeds
We may inhale Despair
At distances of Centuries

From the Malaria —

At a first glance, we may have taken this poem as an apology for the word as a timeless and powerful element. We viewed the term "infection" as a sign for the word ability for spreading itself through centuries. If now we connect infection to despair, infection can probably be viewed as a desire for communication, the affectionate role that language has in our relations causing despair for its own void. But humanity does not easily give it up. The "infection" can last for centuries. Language, indeed, is a means of keeping us connected to past and future. Our knowledge and history, although so many times slantly or even 'badly' told, came to us through language.

Would language not be one of the few things humans can offer each other?

J.26

It's all I have to bring today —
This, and my heart beside —
This, and my heart, and all the fields —
And all the meadows wide —
Be sure you count — should I forget

Some one the sum could tell —

This, and my heart, and all the Bees

Which in the Clover dwell.

By using words the poet brings us language and her heart, language and affection.

NOTES - CHAPTER III

1 - Roland Hagenbüchle, "Sign and Process: The Concept of Language in Emerson and Dickinson," Emerson Society Quarterly 25(1979): 139.

2 - John S. Mann, "Emily Dickinson, Emerson, and the Poet as Namer," New England Quarterly 51(1978): 469.

3 - Ludwig Wittgenstein, Tractatus Logico Philosophicus (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971) 63.

4 - Hagenbüchle 139.

5 - Hagenbüchle 198.

6 - Wittgenstein 99.

7 - Mann 485.

8 - Wittgenstein 189.

9 - Sharon Cameron, Lyric Time - Dickinson and The Limits of Genre (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1984) 194.

10 - Hagenbüchle 149.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

J.26

It's all I have to bring today —

This, and my heart beside —

This, and my heart, and all the fields —

And all the meadows wide —

Be sure you count — Should I forget

Some one the sum could tell —

This, and my heart, and all the Bees

Which in the Clover dwell.

The poem is all the poet has "to bring today." Literature, language is what the poet can offer us. "This, and my heart beside —" Language and heart, language and 'affection,' language and entertainment, poetry.

During this dissertation we have asked some questions in relation to language and literature, in relation to Dickinson's "This, and my heart beside". We have tried to highlight several aspects of language and literature. Why use language, why be a poet, why try to utter things that are so difficult to utter? In the former chapter we have seen some hints which led us to some conclusions towards Dickinson's complex ideas on human language and communication, and, consequently, on human relationships. In some of them, Dickinson shows language as inefficient; in others, as powerful. In others still, she professes her faith on words as "affection." In this chapter we will review some of the main points that were brought up and establish a relationship between them.

As we have seen in the introduction, through some important critical texts, many aspects of her poetry became clearer to me. In other cases, the points highlighted served as a bridge to other important aspects, such as the role of the poet as the language-maker

— the god of the words, language as religion, and language as a powerful weapon. These aspects, naturally, are all implicated in the paradox involving language inefficiency and power, a paradox that this dissertation tried to analyse in readings of specific poems.

Many critics have dealt with the theme of language in Dickinson's poetry, through different approaches. Some of them pointed out the power of words for her; some highlighted their inefficiency. Some worked with both aspects. After having read her poetry extensively, and after having read some of that criticism, I decided to pursue the question of the possible reason for using language, even though it is inefficient. I am conscious, though, that this aspect has been explored by other critics. What I wanted, however, was to present my reading of this aspect in such an intriguing poetry.

Having, then, introduced my thematic concern, I proceeded to make some considerations on language as a topic. I made some comments on texts by Wittgenstein, Saussure and George Steiner, the three of them being quite different in their approaches. Saussure has helped me understand better the idea of language as a system, the physical characteristics of words and the making of language. Also, he makes clear the arbitrary character presented by words. Wittgenstein,

in turn, also works with the arbitrariness of language, but he stresses the inadequacy of language in relation to metaphysics and mystical experiences. Like Dickinson, he also sees silence as an alternative. Finally, George Steiner directs his discussion to language in a historical and political sense. He summarizes important aspects relating to language and life, and shows us the distance between truth and words, reality and language. He also brings the poet as a silence chooser. In general, these texts helped me have a better idea of language as a means of human communication or, sometimes, of non-communication.

After having discussed these theoretical texts on language, I went back to Dickinson's poems and I read some of them in their relation to language. I pointed to interesting aspects in relation to words in her poetry. Like Saussure, Wittgenstein, and Steiner, Dickinson is conscious of language's inadequacy and arbitrariness:

> The signifier actually has no natural
> connection with the signified.[1]

> That which mirrors itself in language,
> language cannot represent.[2]

> It is no paradox to assert that in cardinal respects reality now begins outside verbal language.[3]

J.1700

To tell the Beauty would decrease

To state the Spell demean —

There is a syllable-less Sea

Of which it is the sign is —

(...)

As a poet, though, she still uses language to express its own inadequacy, and even to express silence as an alternative.

My hypothesis, in the beginning of this work, was that language in Dickinson's poetry, although inefficient and inferior to silence, is very important to human relationships. Reading her poetry was not an easy task, due to the idiosyncrasy of her style, but in some of my readings, I was able to perceive that Dickinson views language and words are important for us in terms of "affection," or because it "entertains," although it often "fails."

In Dickinson, the idea of language as artificial and fake becomes clear, but it is still a joy:

J.1639

A Letter is a joy of Earth —

It is denied the Gods —

Language for her is a human link, a human attempt to come together. Perhaps it derives this fake, fictional character from human nature itself. Perhaps it is a reflection of ourselves, and like us, cannot be easily understood.

In closing this chapter, and my dissertation, I would like to say how intrigued I became by Emily Dickinson's work. The originality of her poetry fascinated me from the beginning. And I am sure many other subjects and themes may be analysed and pursued not only in her poetry, but also in her letters.

As an open end for my discussion, I would like to quote another one of Dickinson's poems in which she states her belief that literature, her "letter to the World," will keep her in contact with other people, even though only through words:

J.441

This is my letter to the World

That never wrote to Me —

The simple News that Nature told —

With tender Majesty

Her Message is committed

To Hands I cannot see —

For love of Her — Sweet — countrymen —

Judge tenderly — of Me

NOTES - CHAPTER IV

1 - Ferdinand de Saussure, "Course in General Linguistics," Contemporary Literary Criticism, eds. Robert C. Davis and Ronald Schleifer (New York: Longman, 1989) 160.

2 - Ludwig Wittgenstein. Tratactus Logico Philosophicus. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971, 79.

3 - George Steiner. Language and Silence. London: Penguin Books, 1969, 37.

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